

OPM ASKS HEALTH INSURERS TO PROVIDE INCENTIVES FOR WELLNESS PROGRAMS

By Joe Davidson, Thursday, March 24, 6:45 PM, The Washington Post

John Berry wants insurance companies to help Frankie and Flo Fed lose weight, eat better and generally take good care of their bodies.

Speaking at a meeting of the America's Health Insurance Plans association on Thursday, Berry, director of the Office of Personnel Management, told representatives of companies providing coverage through the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program that they should encourage healthy lifestyles by offering "concrete incentives to participate in wellness and prevention activities."

He said the agency's "call letter," which outlines areas that companies will be expected to cover, will be issued Friday and will encourage programs that reduce obesity and "racial and ethnic disparities in health status and care."

Berry also asked the companies to cover domestic partners of federal workers.

Noting that this week marks the first anniversary of the health-reform law, Berry said his goal is to make the federal health benefits program "the innovation leader in employer-based health care."

Because of the law, Berry said, "Over a quarter million — approximately 280,000 — more young adults, ages 22-26, will remain on their parents' FEHB plan this year. This means fewer young adults are at risk of putting off care or suffering financially due to an accident or injury."

Berry said OPM expects to save \$5 million in premiums by no longer requiring health insurance brochures to be mailed, a remark that drew applause. "The full brochures will be accessible online, and they will still be mailed upon request," Berry said. "But this will save us a heck of a lot of money and a lot of trees."

There was also some clapping when he urged the insurance companies to provide health coverage for same-sex partners of federal employees.

"Some HMOs are already offering coverage for domestic partners and others as a non-FEHB benefit. Thank you," Berry said. "To those who are already doing it, thank you. I strongly encourage all of you to offer this type of affinity benefit for 2012."

The employee would have to pay for that benefit, he explained after his speech, because federal law prohibits the government from doing so.

He said that he and President Obama plan to work with Congress to change the law. Congress, however, didn't do so last year, when Democrats had a majority in both chambers. With Republicans now running the House, chances that the measure will pass have diminished significantly.

But, Berry said, "We're not giving up, because no American family should be denied health insurance. It's not right, and it's not good business. As an employer competing for the best talent, we need a benefits package comparable with the Fortune 500 employers we're competing against, and that means providing benefits to domestic partners."

After his speech, Berry said, "I don't look at this as a partisan issue." Instead, he views the extension of benefits to domestic partners as an important element in the government's efforts to recruit and retain workers, a position he hopes Republicans will support.

"This is a critical tool for us to be competitive" with private employers, he said.